



## An Angry Language: A Stylistic Study of the Images of Men in the Sylvia Plath's "Daddy"

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Received 13 November 2011; accepted 24 February 2012.

### Abstract

Sylvia Plath was the female American confessional poet whose feverish writings before her early death brought about much critical acclaim. In many of her poems, she dexterously manifests the way men assert control over women's identity. This paper focuses on the poem "Daddy" which resonates with her biography and private experiences. By exploring the images of men in "Daddy" through a linguistic and lexico-grammatical method known as system of transitivity which is a big important part of the Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (SFL), we emphasise on the micro elements of words which reveals her attitude and stance toward men.

**Keywords:** Images of men; Plath; Systemic functional linguistic; "Daddy"; Male domination.

Forough Hassanpour, Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2012). An Angry Language: A Stylistic Study of the Images of Men in the Sylvia Plath's "Daddy". *Studies in Literature and Language*, 4(1), 123-128. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320120401.1850> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120401.1850>

### INTRODUCTION

Among her contemporary female confessional poets

such as Anne Sexton, Dian Vokovski and Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath has depicted far more images of men's betrayal in a patriarchal and male-dominated society. "Daddy" is an excellent example of a poem which can be read as a representation of different images of a controlling man. Rather than an elegy or an angry conversation of a girl with her deceased father, "Daddy" can be seen as a manifestation of the different aspects of a woman's oppression by patriarchy. As Ramezani (1997, p.1142) indicates "more than all the other 'dead dears', Plath's father grips her through poem after poem". He connotes in his article *Daddy I have had to kill you* that "In the early elegies, Plath blames her father's death on her excessive love for him" (1144). In this paper, we aim to illuminate Plath's attitudes towards the authorial figures (father, husband and men in power) to show how the images of men can be read through the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (hereafter referred to as SFL).

Plath's poetry has been read to reveal its autobiographical precision, domestic roles, psychological conflicts, and masculine entrapment. "Daddy" has been scrutinised through different angles. Axelrod (1990, p.33) connotes in his book *The Wound and the Cure of Words* that Plath in "Daddy" as a young Jewish woman likes to express her anger about male mastery and searches for her identity. Although Alvarez (1976, p.77) concedes that "Daddy" deals more with the element of pity, critics regard this poem as Plath's forum to express her hatred toward men, particularly her father and her husband.

A brief look at the previous studies on Plath's poems shows that none of them especially those which referred to "Daddy" focused on linguistic perspective. Hence, the lexico-grammatical exploration of her work using the linguistic method would be insightful because it can render the negative images of men more vividly.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

In this paper, we intend to examine the linguistic features of "Daddy" to explore the way she depicts men, linguistically or in other words lexico-grammatically through the approach of Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL). This paper demonstrates how man as an individual or as a member of community treats women. What kind of language is used in terms of the grammar and lexicon (words), functions, processes (verbs) and transitivity to describe men in specific social and cultural contexts divulge the specific ways Plath makes overt how women's oppression is maintained. In this poem, the numbers of material processes which show action, physical experience, agency (Actor, Doer) are all attributed to men. Hence, the micro elements of the language combine to imply sharply that men have the authority, power and the choice while women are cast as the object, goal, and phenomenon with agency and actor hood being excluded from female identity. If a woman is the doer, the sentence changes to a passive voice indicating that the action of the woman is insignificant.

We use the SFL theory because the focus is on linguistic analysis of the poems. The linguistic approach can go beyond the sentence level where many choices at the clause rank are manifested. There is no linguistic approach like the SFL that can investigate the social function of words and word structure. It is not solely based on grammar because meaning is central in the SFL. The SFL can also depict the writer's character and speaker which includes ideologies and perceptions of the world. The SFL can display the relationship of the participant, character or persona in the poem and the textual level of metafunction; the themes as the given information can show tenaciously the writer's world view or scheme of things. The SFL with the Transitivity system reveals the process involved in a text. SFL is a universal approach as grammar is a universal phenomenon to language which unveils the language discourse and texts. Through the lexico-grammatical lens, discourse analysts can examine the language to find lexico-grammatical choices where a special linguistic feature is foregrounded or diverted. It is like breaking the convention (linguistic system of wording) or structure where the words with semantic loads are highlighted or emphasised.

The employed theoretical framework was pioneered by M.A.K. Halliday and Matthiessen. In the SFL, there are three metafunctions that represent the function of language in the system of language. They are: 1) the Interpersonal Metafunction for enacting personal and social relationship, 2) the Textual Metafunctions for the construction of text and 3) Ideational Metafunction for construing experience. Ideational metafunction comprises two components which are the experiential and the logical components (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

For the purpose of this paper, the experiential metafunction of the ideational metafunction, realised through the System of transitivity will be employed as it construes experience known as the on-going (events) which include these modes: Happening, doing, sensing, meaning and being and becoming. Halliday's transitivity can expose the basic linguistic characteristics of texts, especially literary materials because of their rich linguistic features. We will follow the transitivity system to explore how men are manifested in Plath's "Daddy".

## IDEATIONAL FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE: TRANSITIVITY

Transitivity refers to a system that "construes the world of experience into a manageable set of processes types (verbs)" (Halliday, 1994, p.106). This system is used to realise the experiential metafunction that is one of the sub-functions of the ideational metafunction in which language is used to express content. The transitivity analysis can uncover the relationship between the action of an Actor and its impact on the Goal. The transitivity in Halliday's view is more semantic than purely a syntactic concept. As Iwamoto (n. d, p.69) argued, in semantic descriptions of transitivity, rather than syntactic one, the basic point is whether there is an implication of an animate individual (Actor, Agent) intentionally doing the action to another entity (Goal).

A semantic process comprises three components which function as the framework to interpret our experience about the goings-on (events). These components are the "process itself (verb), the participants in the process known as actor and goal which in different kinds of verbs or process types give different names such as the sensor in mental process (mental verb) or behavior in behavioural process (behavioural verb) and circumstances associated with the process (adverbs)" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p.170-176). These three components are realised by different groups, as explained below:

(1) The process itself, which is expressed by the verb phrase in a clause (verbal group).

(2) The participants in the clause, which refers to the roles of entities that are directly involved in the process: the one that behaves or says, together with the passive one that is done to, or said to. The participant is not necessarily human or even animate. They are usually known by noun phrases (nominal group or noun phrases).

(3) The circumstances associated with the processes (verbs) which are normally realised by adverbial and prepositional phrases (Halliday, 1985, p.101-102).

Poetry, as a literary genre, encompasses various forms of language rules. As a result, the linguistic approach, particularly the SFL, is applicable to poetry. In this case, processes and participants which "constitute the experiential centre of the clause" (Halliday and

Matthiessen, 2004, p.176) play the same role in poetry as they do in prose. The processes are realised by the verbal group (verbs) while the participants are realised by the Nominal group (Doer, actor, goal, and target). In poetry, the participant can be a speaker if the speakers do an act, or an act is done on them. The participants can be involved in many processes and they are called according to the Process type (kind of verb) with which they occur. This signifies that the same participant can occur as an Actor in a material process or as a Senser in a Mental Process. The Actor is a compulsory factor and indicates the doer of the process (verbs).

## DISCUSSION

We shall analyse Plath's point of view about men and the issues such as betrayal, domination, patriarchy and tyranny in "Daddy" by utilising the transitivity system. This poem can be considered as Plath's forum to speak about the problems which women struggle with in the male dominated society.

In this analysis, the italic format has been utilised for the stanza itself, bold format for clause, and functions of participant appear within the square brackets to show the function of participants, and factors which may help the reader to understand better the situation involved are shown using the round brackets.

### "DADDY"

"Daddy" is a kind of elegy, an angry conversation of a daughter with her deceased father. This poem describes the speaker's confused identity and her resentment with her dead father whom she wishes to kill him due to his relationship to "Nazi" and "Fascist" system as a symbol of male authority and its hegemony on the society and women as a vulnerable part of the community. Its depiction of several aspects of the father and its extension to other men such as the husband can be related to the poet's personal experiences.

In this poem, Plath shows a clear portrayal of a father as shown in the excerpt below:

You do not do, you do not do.  
Any more black shoe, in which I have lived like a foot,  
For thirty years, poor and white,  
Barely daring to breath or Achoo.

"You do not do, you do not do.

Any more black shoe"

[Repetition, "you" refer to father, "do not do" material process (action) and negative. "Black shoe" is "addressee" and is a metaphor for father.]

**You** [actor] **do not do** [material process (action)], **you** [actor] **do not do** [material process (action, negative)]

**Any more** [circumstance: temporal, negative] **black shoe** [attribute, carrier (you) (you are a black show)], [addressee, metaphor] (actor),

**In which** [circumstance; spatial], **I** [actor] **have**

**lived** [material process, (action)] **like** [circumstance; comparison] **a foot** [attribute, metaphor]

**For thirty years** [circumstance; duration, adverbial phrase], **poor and white** [attribute, subjective and objective, negative implication]

**Barely** [circumstance; temporal, negative, adjunct] **daring** [mental process] **to breath or Achoo** [finite, behavioural process].

This example illuminates the male's (father) authority which inhibits every activity. "You" as daddy is an actor who represents the father's ineffectiveness in the new circumstance which is death. Use of "do not" which is not a contraction form of verb shows the formal conversation with a superior person. The speaker attempts to throw away this black shoe which is reminiscent of the Chinese's ancient tradition in which the girls' feet were bound tightly to constrict their growth. This custom inhibited the woman from walking fast; their small steps apparently intensified their femininity and charm. However, their unnaturally small feet took away their freedom to perform their tasks properly. The female persona's attempt to throw away this shoe may refer to infringement of this obstructive action in order to gain freedom. "Black" implies the dark spirit of a father who is in control of the daughter. "Poor" and "white" reflect the female speaker's weakness. The speaker clearly exhibits her inability to live fully due to the fact that she has lost her enjoyment of the basic point of life which is the behavioural process captured by the words "breath" and "Achoo". This also implies the father's tyrannical behaviour towards his daughter.

Daddy, I have had to kill you,  
You died before I had time-  
Marble heavy, the bag full of God,  
Ghastly statue with one grey toe  
Big as Frisco seal.

"Daddy, I have had to kill you"

[ "Daddy": addressee, "I": doer, "kill": material process(action).]

"You died before I had time"

[ "You": addressee refers to father, "I" :doer, "had time": relational process: possessive.]

"Marble heavy, the bag full of god"

[ "Marble heavy": attribute, "a bag full of god"; attribute, "ghastly statue with one grey toe": attribute, "big as Frisco seal" all of attribute refer to "daddy" (carrier).]

**Daddy** [addressee], **I** [doer, actor] **have had to** [strong modal auxiliary of necessity and certainty], **kill** [material process, action and negative load] **you** [goal, refer to daddy)].

The above line demonstrates the unfulfilled dream of a girl or a woman. This dream is the overt desire of the female speaker to kill hegemony embodied in the form of the father. The death of father allows the woman's entity and identity to emerge. The visionary murder which has a negative connotation shows that the father's death may

not be a physical death. The strong modal of necessity "had to" shows the inclination to "kill" as a very negative material process which implies the speaker's excessive hatred and anger toward her father. The process type (kill) has not yet occurred, although the female speaker is supposed to be a doer but it remains as an imaginary action. "Daddy" frequently is used in the first of every line to emphasise the daddy's salient dominance mocked by the daughter. The speaker addresses her father using some consecutive attributes derisively. She refers to her father as a marble who is just heavy and not glassy. She derides her father and all male personas as God crammed in a bag. A "bag full of God" is a metaphor for the father but as the God is too big to be put in the bag, it can be said that what is inside the bag is not God. Daddy tries to imitate God but his attempt is just a poor imitation and proves his tyranny and hegemony. God is all Compassionate and Merciful but "Daddy" does not have God's attributes.

I never could talk to you.  
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

"I never could talk to you."

["I": sayer, "never could talk": verbal process, negative.]

"The tongue stuck in my jaw."

["The tongue": behavior, "stuck": behavioural process, "my jaw": circumstance: spatial: place.]

**I** [sayer] **never could talk** [verbal process, negative] **to you** [target]. **The tongue** [behavior] **stuck** [behavioural process] **in my jaw** [adjunct phrase, circumstance: spatial: place].

Although the female persona is a "sayer" and not a goal, she is unable to act due to the target's tyrannical behaviour (father), husband or any male-centred system. It shows, however, that the female speaker can be an actor, a sayer or behavior but the social ambiance precludes her to act. In the following example, Plath depicts her father's physical appearance with some attributes:

**I** [senser] **have always** [circumstance: temporal; frequency] **been scared** [mental process; negative feeling] **of you** [phenomenon]

**With your Luftwaffe** [circumstance, prepositional phrase], **your gobbledy gook** [circumstance, noun phrase, with the preposition is omitted]

**And your neat moustache** [circumstance, prepositional phrase, adding, possessive, attribute (positive epithet), part of masculine face and power],

**Your Arian eye** [noun phrase, possessive + attribute (nationality) + noun, visual imagery], **bright blue** [attribute positive, objective].

**Panzer-man, panzer man** [addressee, value], **O** [interjection: exclamatory word] **you** [addressee, token].

"I have always been scared of you"

["I": senser, "have been scared": mental process, "of you": phenomenon.]

"With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledy gook."

["With your Luftwaffe": possessive pronoun and attribute, "your gobbledy gook": attribute possessive pronoun and attribute.]

"And your neat moustache"

["Your neat moustache": relational and attribute refer to carrier "daddy"]

"Your Arian eyes"

[Arian eyes: refer to daddy. Possessive adjective.]

"Panzer-man, panzer-man, o you"

[Repetition, emphasising on the father's situation and the speaker attitudes towards him. Addressee, refer to daddy.]

The choice of word "Daddy" shows the speaker's inferior situation towards the father. It is the word that a little girl calls her father and infers hegemony of the father on her daughter. "I" here is a senser who is "always" caught in the circumstance of frequency that relates to her continuous fear. The father has been described by some attributes through the adjective phrases. The "gobbledy gook" label may refer to the father's convoluted language which makes dialogue or communication impossible because of gender and status differences. The speaker tries to embody her father's positive characters such as "bright blue eyes". "Neat moustache" denotes the father's insistence to show his masculinity manifested in his masculine physical appearance. The father may refer to all men such as the husband, employer and social leaders who use their power to oppress. In these lines, the phenomenon is a man and the senser is a scared woman, girl, wife or a woman. This line echoes the holocaust's narration and the "panzer-man" which is repeated twice to emphasise daddy's contribution to Nazism as symbol of hegemony and, elucidating that every man – father, husband, and son- is capable of this power.

The following example can clearly indicate that the speaker regards her father as symbol of cruel behaviour and generalises him through a historical event.

An engine, an engine  
Chuffing me off like a Jew

"An engine, an engine"

[Refers to "daddy", repetition]

"Chuffing me off like a Jew"

["Chuffing": Material process, action, "Jew:" attribute]

**An engine** [addressee], **an engine** [addressee; repetitive for emphasis], **Chuffing** [material process] **me** [goal] **like** [circumstance; comparison] **a Jew** [attribute, simile].

The use of "engine" shows men's mechanical and emotionless behaviour act without any sensibility and sense. Women's passivity is foregrounded in these lines. As Weighell (2010) connotes, within the patriarchal roles of society, fathers must be strong and act as tyrants. In "Daddy" the speaker projects the image of a fascist on to her father. The fascist is the ultimate symbol of controlling dictating power. In this poem, Plath may not be talking

solely of her father but of the patriarchal society in which she lives in (2010. para.5).

Every woman adores a Fascist,  
The boot in the face, the brute,  
Brute heart of a brute like you.

**Every woman** [senser] **adore** [mental process, affection] **a Fascist** [phenomenon],

**The boot** [phenomenon, descriptive metaphor and image] **in the face** (phenomenon)[circumstance; location], **the brute** [attribute, noun as metaphor]

**Brute heart** [metonymy; noun phrase; adjective + noun] **of a brute** [phenomenon; prepositional phrase] **like** [circumstance; comparison] **you** [addressee, simile].

The example shows that woman is senser and she has to love a brutal man, “a fascist” realised through a phenomenon by the process type “adores” which is a mental process. The fascist is a man who behaves cruelly and the woman has to accept that she has to live in his domination. She is subjugated by her man who can be generalised as a social tyrant. The word “boot” and “Fascist” make the meaning parallel signifying the historical evidence of male ruthlessness. Weighell (2010, para.6) implies that “Plath’s use of alliteration is very artistic and perceptive; the repetition of the letter b and the word brute echoes the sound and motion of a boot in the face”. Weighell maintains that “she feels as though she is being kicked in the face by a brute person who can be her father or possibly men in general” (2010, para6).

The following line of “Daddy” reveals that man is doing a vicious act and the woman here a daughter, and in a large scale, all women who live under the thumb of patriarchal community are enforced to obedience. Plath says:

Any less the black man who,  
Bit my pretty red heart in two.

“Any less the black man who”

[“Black man” refers to Plath’s husband]

“Bit my pretty red heart in two”

[“Bit”: material process; action, “red heart” and “black” contrast.]

**Any less** [circumstance; degree] **the black man** [doer, actor] **who**

**Bit**[material process; negative] **my pretty red heart**[goal+ possessive pronoun+ noun phrase(degree+adj+noun)] **in two** [circumstance; manner; quality].

The example signifies the man as an actor and the goal “my pretty red heart” is possessed by a woman. “Pretty” and “red” as adjectives for heart refer to weakness and passivity associated with the female persona. The word “black” refers to the father’s dark heart that is insensitive to the daughter’s pain. Daddy is a “black man” and a doer, doing an act which is “biting” causing injury, bleeding the heart, but he is unconscious of the hurt inflicted.

Plath’s projection of men is explicitly expressed in

“Daddy”:

I made model of you  
A man in black with a Minicamp look

“I made model of you”

[“I”: doer, “model of you”: goal]

“A man in black with a Minicamp look”

[“A man in black”: goal, prepositional phrase, “with a Minicamp look”: prepositional phrase, circumstance of manner: accompaniment]

“And love of the rack and the screw”

[“Love of rack and screw”: circumstance of manner; accompaniment.]

**I** [doer] **made** [mental process; cognition] **model of you** [goal]

**A man in black with a Minicamp look** [prepositional phrase, goal]

**And love of the rack and the screw** [prepositional phrase, attribute].

The female persona is a senser, imagining her husband the same as her father. Although “made” is a material process, here it means that she is pretending and it is realised by a mental process. It can signify that the female persona is a visionary actor. The phrase such as “in black” and the verbs such as “screw” and “rack” indicate the male actions implying Plath’s worldview of men. According to Lant in her article the *Big Strip Tease: female body and Male Power* “Ultimately, the most powerful act a male can perform, in Plath’s personal mythology, is rape” (1993, p.643). Hence, it can be considered that this kind of action is regarded as a brutal behaviour.

The female’s reaction against the male’s savage acts has been described in this line of “Daddy”:

If I kill one man, I will kill two-  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year...

“If I kill one man, I will kill two”

[“I”: actor, “one man”: goal, “I”: actor, “kill”:]

“The vampire who said he was you”

[“Vampire”: refer to husband(two)]

“And drank my blood for a year...”

[“Drank”: material, “my blood”: goal process: action, for a year”: circumstance; temporal: duration]

**If I** [doer] **kill** [material process] **one man**[ goal], **I have killed** [material process] **two (man)** [goal],

**The vampire** [sayer] **who said** [verbal process] **he was you** [verbiage]

**And drank** [material process] **my blood** [goal (referred to female persona)] **for years** [circumstance; duration].

Although in this example, the female persona is doing an action realised as material process “kill”, it is an unreal and an imaginary act on the men and has not been fulfilled. The “Vampire” is an attribute and implies the male persona’s sucking life out of the woman due to his insensitivity and oppression. The speaker wishes that she could have killed her father and her husband who embody

each other.

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## CONCLUSION

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Plath's outlook towards men shows a high degree of resentment and bitterness. This paper which explores Plath's views about men in "Daddy" through a linguistic and stylistic approach, aims to show how socially constructed meaning and linguistic structure in the poetic discourse is related. As we have shown in the discussion, male personas are almost doer and behavior, doing a violent and cruel action on women. By contrast, the female persona is mostly associated with mental processes such as "feeling", "imagining" and "wishing" and in case of doing an action, she is the unfulfilled doer who wants to exact revenge, but does not have the agency to fulfil her revenge. Utilising this process types shows that the woman reacts to male actions but only carries them in a make-believe way. Hence, it shows the man as the active doer and the woman as passive. The verbs (process types) such as "bit", "rack", "screw", "rape", and "chuffing me" illustrate men's violent actions towards women. Conversely, the emotive terms which imply femininity and incapability such as "scared", "my pretty red", "pure" and "white" are associated with the female speaker's state of being dominated. In Plath's world view, women seem to be the goal and target of men's desire to maintain dominance.

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